OpinionLiving Faith

WHAT DO POLITICIANS MEAN WHEN THEY INVOKE MATTHEW 25?

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Historian Heath Carter **tweeted last week**: “In recent years Matthew 25 has been a real staple of the progressive political canon. Would be curious to know how and when this came to be. In the earlier twentieth century other texts (i.e., Matt 7:12, which states the Golden Rule) were more likely to be invoked.” This was in response to Sen. **Elizabeth Warren's words** in the Feb. 26 primary debate.

> My motto ties in directly to Matthew 25: Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. It's about how we treat other people and lift them up. That is why I am in this fight.

But Warren isn't the only one to lift up Matthew 25. Other former presidential candidates have cited or quoted the passage, including South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg and New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker. Many have pointed to these instances as evidence of the particular emergence of the "religious left." Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons has **described** the religious left consisting of "individuals and groups who are politically part of the American Left or progressive movement and also self-identify as religious, whether that's Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh, or any other of the myriad religious groups that make up our nation's spiritual patchwork."

What exactly is being invoked with Matthew 25? The chapter itself includes apocalyptic scenes narrated through the familiar parables of the 10 bridesmaids and talents. These politicians seem to inflect a similar kind of urgency as the Gospel passage, highlighting the last section about feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger.

While an argument might be made about the **futility of quoting scripture passages like Matthew 25 as a faith outreach strategy** to "cut into what is a pretty solid bloc of Christians," I wonder if invoking it

might actually be doing something else. Could this be an attempt to take back the narrative, as they say? To show that “religious” and “left” aren’t contradictions, but synonymous?

Recall that the Matthew 25 Network founded in 2008 by strategist Mara Vanderslice was a grassroots PAC designed to organize the Christian left for Obama. **The same values around justice and care were highlighted** by Warren later in 2012 at the Democratic National Convention. She talked about compassion toward the most vulnerable, or “the least of these,” but it was specifically interpreted as a reminder “that we are bound to each other, and we are called to act — not to sit, not to wait — but to act, all of us together.”

In other words, perhaps invoking Matthew 25 is not a strategy to woo or convert the fairly entrenched evangelical base that supports Trump, but rather to mobilize around an optimism in the possibility of recuperating some notion of shared American values. Despite the large camps situated at the right and left, religious or not, many more Americans are in the middle somewhere. Perhaps the backlash from the extreme polarization in our political climate right now will be fertile ground to sow something different. Derrick Harkins, the veteran pastor who now serves as the Democratic National Committee’s national director of interfaith outreach, has said that Matthew 25’s “universal theme” resonates beyond the Christian faith.

Ultimately, the issue isn’t who is or isn’t quoting scripture, or even what kind of scripture they are quoting in their ad campaigns. It is that both the left and right dilute, theologically and politically, what Jesus was talking about in this moment. Matthew 25 wasn’t about identity — about being sheep or goat, wise or foolish, left or right, certainly, not Christian or American. It wasn’t even about moralistic ideals around unity and

inclusion, which often end up looking like something more akin to homogeneity. Yes, the parable begins with “all the nations” but the Greek word for nation — *ethne* — specifically connotes Gentiles, i.e., outsiders and outliers. This is a part of Matthew’s aim, after all, to imagine otherwise, and to rewrite the genealogy of the world in light of Jesus’ life and death on earth.

Matthew 25 isn’t meant to be a warm and fuzzy, feel-good passage as if it were a preview of the kind of justice we think the “other side” will get come judgement day. It’s not meant to be a promise of utopia or a more perfect union. God’s kingdom just doesn’t fit our terms of order. It is ushered in not by platitudes nor is it established by the building blocks of any of our civilizations, past and present. It comes to us through those who are on the outside, not only of all our political structures, but even our theological categories and systems. Neither the right or left have got all the answers.

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